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World Chronicle

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GUEST: **Cornelio SOMMARUGA**
President
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JOURNALISTS: Afsane Bassir Pour, *Le Monde*
James Bone, *The Times* of London

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INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS

CORNELIO SOMMARUGA, President of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), stresses the neutrality and independence of ICRC in carrying out its humanitarian mission in protecting and assisting victims of conflicts and disasters around the globe. ICRC works in close cooperation with other international relief agencies such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Mr. Sommaruga calls on all countries to adhere to international law in their treatment of victims of internal conflicts. With more than 200 million mines planted in different parts of the world, the President of the ICRC urges the international community to restrict the use of such weapons.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**. As long as armed conflicts continue to rage and manmade disasters continue to strike, every assistance possible should be provided to alleviate the resulting human suffering.

That's been the primary purpose of the International Committee of the Red Cross and its national affiliates for more than a century. Our guest today is in a unique position to keep the hope alive for millions of victims around the world.

He's Cornelio Sommaruga, President of the International Committee of the Red Cross. Joining me to speak with Mr. Sommaruga are Afsane Bassir Pour of *Le Monde* and James Bone of *The Times* of London. Mr. Sommaruga, welcome to World Chronicle.

SOMMARUGA: Very pleased to be here.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. President, I guess most people have heard of the Red Cross or the Red Crescent as it is in some countries. Tell us a bit about the background. How did the Red Cross come into being and why has it been so closely identified with Switzerland.

SOMMARUGA: Well, it was created in Switzerland one hundred thirty years ago immediately after a tremendous battle that took place in northern Italy where Henri Dunon was President. So the Red Cross has been born in war. And the International Committee of the Red Cross that has been the founder of the old Red Cross movement, continues to work in conflictual situations, both by prevention through creating international humanitarian law for states and then with the direct activity of protection and assistance of victims of war or potential victims.

LITTLEJOHNS: How do the National Red Cross Organizations fit into your international committee?

SOMMARUGA: The international committee is the specific neutral intermediary in conflictual situations. The National Red Cross and the Crescent societies are forming with their federation the whole of the Red Cross and Crescent movement. We have very close relations with all the societies. We have as the International Committee to recognize a new society in order that they would be able to carry the emblem of the Red Cross or the Red Crescent and we very often in the field work with them. That is to say, with participating societies coming with us somewhere in a conflictual situation, particularly in the field of rehabilitation of the post-conflictual

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phase, or then with the local society when we are somewhere where there is such a society. And today in almost all countries of the world you have a Red Cross or a Crescent society. More than one hundred sixty, I think one hundred sixty two societies today.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Sommaruga, you use the word neutral. Does that mean that the ICRC never takes a political position?

SOMMARUGA: Certainly neutrality of the ICRC comes from the Latin word - *neutrum* not to take a stand for the one or the other party in a conflict. But this certainly doesn't mean that we are neutral in front of the victims. We have to react in front of the victims. We have to see that we can reach the victims. We have to see that we can protect them and assist them.

LITTLEJOHNS: You never condemn atrocities or violations of convention.

SOMMARUGA: Well, I think this is not really always so. We have very strict rules internally as to violations of international humanitarian law. That is to say the Geneva Conventions when we have reached the stage that we can publicly appeal to put an end to these violations. And I would say that in the last years during my Chairmanship, these appeals have been very frequent. Particularly, in the Yugoslav conflict, I have had to make very firm appeals to put to an end violations. I even did it in the last weeks again for some specific situations in Mostar, in Vares and so on.

POUR: But speaking about the Yugoslav conflict can you as ICRC provide information for example on the atrocities to this court that's being set up in the Hague?

SOMMARUGA: I would say no, and this is certainly something which is the will of the states that have created this court. While we have received a mandate from the international community to reach the victims, to protect the prisoners so that they are treated according to human dignity, to reach the civilian population in order to avoid that there would be atrocities for them. And certainly in order to be able to do that, governments, parties to a conflict must know that we are not going there to make inquiries. Otherwise we would never have access to the victims. So that it is clearly accepted by the international community that ICRC delegates would not be used in order to report on individual persons that have committed such atrocities.

BONE: Do you find that you ever duplicate the functions that the United Nations is conducting? For instance, one thinks of Giandomenico Picco, the former UN official who tried to negotiate the release of American hostages in Lebanon. Is that the kind of situation where there the jurisdiction isn't clear?

SOMMARUGA: No, I think that the mandate of the ICRC is very wide and clear in the Geneva conventions. It is important to have an open dialogue with the United Nations, both in the field and in the headquarters of Geneva and of New York. This is why we have a delegation in New York. This is why I am visiting regularly the headquarters of the United Nations. Certainly there may be particularly in modern conflicts sometimes a work hand in hand with United Nations agencies as UNHCR for relief operations. This is a case -

BONE: High Commissioner for Refugees.

SOMMARUGA: Yes. This is the case in former Yugoslavia. Now I think that this is not a problem. What becomes a problem is when there is a fully integrated approach of political, military and humanitarian action from the side of the United Nations where the neutrality and impartiality and independence of the humanitarian side is no more recognized by the parties in the field. And this is a very crucial problem and in this moment, then we have to keep our distance from the United Nations system.

BONE: This has particularly been the case in Somalia, hasn't it?

SOMMARUGA: Yes, indeed. How could we have visited twenty four hours after they were captured, these men - there were a few missing too. One was an American pilot, Mike Durand and others, a Nigerian and so on. How could we have done it if we would have been confronted with the UN intervention in Somalia. We were completely out of all that. We had relations with both sides and at the right moment, we went and we visited them and then there were also those that proceeded to the liberation and repatriation.

LITTLEJOHNS: But some of your people in Somalia were actually rather critical of the UN, I believe, the way things were being done in Somalia.

SOMMARUGA: Well, I think there is a major problem. This is the respect of basic humanitarian principles of international humanitarian law by all armed forces in the world, including United Nations armed forces, blue helmets. They have to comply with basic principles of international humanitarian law. What is that? Is rather simple because the first thing is to be clear that the civilian population cannot become the target of attacks, armed attacks. Secondly, prisoners have to be treated according to very clear rules which are in the third Geneva Convention, treated according to human dignity. And the families have to know that they have been captured and the prisoners have the right to be visited by the International Committee of the Red Cross. And then another point that was very of great actuality in Somalia is that the wounded have to be taken care of independently of their origin or nationality. All hospitals have to be open for wounded. They have immediately to be transported. And this was at the beginning

a certain problem. We had then to clarify a number of questions. And I think that indeed, the United Nations were probably not prepared that their operation would go so far as to be peace enforcement operation. And that their own military would be perceived as the enemies by the different factions, or some factions, or one faction in Somalia. This is an important fact and I think that now matters have been a lot improved.

POUR: Well, the same allegations came from the Amnesty International. They said that the detainees were not being correctly protected by the UN and the families didn't know. Were you able to visit some of the Somali detainees by the UNISOM forces.

SOMMARUGA: Certainly, we did all together. There are no problems any more. At the beginning it was very difficult. At the beginning we had to establish that people, military forces of the UN detaining them were not prepared to deal with prisoners. And they didn't know very well how to behave. How for example to keep a register of prisoners. How to notify through the ICRC the families and so on. And this we had to negotiate, to put in order with the Unisom commander.

BONE: At one point though the UN spokesman in New York said the United Nations wasn't a signatory of the Geneva Conventions and so wasn't specifically bound by the Geneva Conventions as an intergovernmental agency.

SOMMARUGA: I think that such legal quarrels are really out of order. If the United Nations have to give the example of behaviour in the world, they should be the first that they would apply humanitarian principles. Do not forget that all countries of the United Nations have all signed the Geneva Conventions. Do not forget that all those countries giving blue helmets have signed the Geneva Conventions. That's for me, there is no question that all the UN peacekeeping forces are bound by the principle of international humanitarian law. Clearly that the United Nations and such has not signed the Geneva Conventions because one says in the Geneva Conventions, the parties to the convention are governments, are states, so that it is not for the organization itself to sign them.

BONE: Obviously international humanitarian law is something that evolves. I wonder what you think about the principle that's been asserted recently of the right of humanitarian intervention, a droit d'ingérence. It's been exercised for instance in northern and Southern Iraq by the creation of no fly zones there. It's also relied on in Somalia. Yes.

SOMMARUGA: Well, I don't know if you can apply in a straightforward way this terminology, droit d'ingérence, that should be translated into English with right of

interference is for me something which contains a contradiction already when you say it because if you have the right, then there is no interference. If you are interfering, it means that you are going against a certain right. Now the Geneva Conventions are very clear. They say that in an armed conflict, if there are needs of the population, then humanitarian assistance, carried out by an independent and impartial institution cannot be considered as interference. So the question is another thing. When there are situations where international law is violated by parties to a conflict, that is to say that civilians are not treated correctly, prisoners are not treated correctly. Prisoners are not treated correctly. It's not a question of interference in the sense of humanitarian assistance, it's a question of seeing to it that international law is applied. That there would be a stop to that. And then the United Nations Charter gives the possibility for the states to interfere. To intervene, I would say, and this is very important, create an environment that would be secure for humanitarian assistance, but humanitarian assistance in order to be impartial, in order to be reaching all the victims, in order to be perceived as neutral, has to be carried out by an institution which has really this neutrality not to be confounded with a military or political action.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is World Chronicle. Our guest is Cornelio Sommaruga, president of the International Committee of the Red Cross. Afsane, would you like to pick up?

POUR: Yes. I was looking at the list of countries that have adhered to all these international laws and I see that the US and the UK have only signed the Geneva Convention and nothing else since.

SOMMARUGA: Well, there is indeed a situation which has been underlined lately by a conference convened by the Swiss government called the Conference for the Protection of Victims of War. It took place end of August '93 and there, there was one hundred sixty countries participating and the underlying was that protocols, additional protocols should be signed by all countries. These additional protocols are two instruments created in 1977 to enhance the protection of the civilian population both - one protocol in international conflict and one protocol in internal conflict. And we have now I think one hundred thirty, one hundred thirty five signatories of the protocol. The United States and France have not signed, not adhered to one of the protocols, France and both protocols the United States. But the very interesting news are that the United Kingdom, after this conference, just made a statement in Parliament saying the intention of Her Majesty's government to ratify the two protocols. So we are looking forward to

this ratification and I think this will enhance the whole process to make all of these protocols really universal.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Sommaruga, the government of Israel and the PLO have signed this historic agreement. Tell us a bit about your operations in that region.

SOMMARUGA: Well, these are very important operations. Since twenty seven years we are there, and we are protecting the population of the occupied territories. This is an operation which is going on, on the basis of the fourth Geneva convention which is specifically directed to the protection of the population in occupied zones. And it consists of particularly in visiting prisoners. We are visiting around twelve to thirteen thousand prisoners, both in Israel and in the territories. And we certainly are very present in the territories in order to try to accompany the civilian population to advise the occupying power in order to behave correctly.

LITTLEJOHNS: Do you get full cooperation from the Israelis?

SOMMARUGA: We have full cooperation from the Israeli government and I would like to state that very clearly that it is rather exceptional to be able to cooperate in this way even if we are very critical to the behaviour of the Israeli defense forces in many situations. But the cooperation, the dialogue is an excellent one. And I would say that after the signature of the Arafat-Rabin Agreement, there has been also a new approach also for us in those territories which are going toward the autonomy and what for me is very important, a new form of cooperation between the society - Red Crescent Society of the territories called Palestinian Red Crescent and the society of Israel called "Magen David Adom" of Israel. And there is now a cooperation. I have had the chance to put the two presidents together lately in order to discuss of these programmes of Cooperation.

BONE: Mr. Sommaruga, do you think that international humanitarian law stays up to date. I mean are the Geneva Conventions outdated now by changes. There's a lot of talk at the United Nations for instance of making it a specific crime of international humanitarian law to attack peacekeeping troops.

SOMMARUGA: Well, this is an important new element because of the fact that United Nations are now making these actions. I think that it's a general problem. Law cannot be static. Law, both national and international law has always to adapt and so quickly as possible to new phenomena of the society. And certainly international humanitarian law has also to go in this direction. But I think one has not to go too fast. We need to have a law which would be universally acceptable. I have in this respect two priorities as a dynamic that one should follow for the next years. First of all to enhance the provisions applicable to internal conflicts. It is rather - it is not understandable that

certain forms and methods of conduct are banned from international conflict. And nothing is said for internal conflict. I think it's unacceptable that you do not use internationally certain weapons, but you can use it against your own brother and citizens. Secondly, there is a serious problem which is stretching certainly humanitarian law. These are certain weapons used still which are making disasters. I would like to refer as an example, but it is a very important one, to landmines. Landmines and there are reports saying that there are around two hundred million mines in the ground in the world, are very often made in order to wound the enemy and not necessarily to kill him. Because a wounded costs a lot more for the enemy. And this means that you have so many amputized people, you have to rehabilitate them. You paralyse by mines the life of a certain region. Agriculture is no more carried out because in the acres you have mines. And this is going on. So that I would really like to say mines is an example where international law has to advance and to restrict the use. There will be a United Nations conference of the revision of the convention of 1980 next year, '94 and I very much hope that there serious progress will be made.

POUR: Another debate in the Security Council to follow what James was saying is whether the Security Council should get involved in internal conflicts and whether it should as in the case of Somalia, impose peace. What's your opinion on this debate.

SOMMARUGA: I would prefer not to have to take a stand on that. I think it's a very political question and it's a question pertaining to the United Nations. The United Nations have to be able to interpret their own Charter as they feel that it is needed. For me certainly what is important is that international law would be applied and that there would be an enforcement of all these provisions. I always say that for international humanitarian law, we need not only respect but also to insure respect. There's a collective responsibility of the international community. Now if it is a collective responsibility, the means to be applied are not in the hands of the ICRC, they are in the hands of the United Nations.
They have to handle, to decide on the basis of the Charter.

POUR: Their decisions have a direct effect on your work.

SOMMARUGA: Well, I would say that all those decisions which are creating an environment which is secure for humanitarian activities are certainly to be welcome. All those decisions where the United Nations are calling for a better respect of international humanitarian law are to be welcomed. All those decisions where the United Nations are foreseeing a serious penal judgment of those violating international

humanitarian law, not only in a specific case as for Yugoslavia, but in a general global way, are to be welcomed.

I think that the difficulties may arise when there are decisions where everything is mixed up. That politics are going with humanitarian I have already said, this is dangerous.

BONE: Well, when you read about Red Cross workers being in Somalia or former Yugoslavia or the Middle East, who are these people and are they paid, are they volunteers, is it a dangerous job?

SOMMARUGA: They are - it's a very dangerous job yes. I have lost in the last two years seven expatriated collaborators and at least fifteen local employees in different situations of armed conflicts. These people are primarily delegates of the international committee. These are paid Red Cross workers, but certainly volunteers in the sense that nobody can compel them to work for us. Generally these collaborators are Swiss collaborators because the institution is a multinational Swiss institution, the ICRC. But we also have a number of collaborators which have been put at our disposal from Red Cross or Red Crescent societies for a certain time. So that when I went to Somalia in the first months of '93 and I visited my whole delegation - we had there, still two hundred expatriates, and I think fifty percent were not Swiss.

BONE: About how many people do you have working for the ICRC?

SOMMARUGA: Globally I would say today eight thousand. Of them, seven thousand, perhaps a little less are local employees in fifty six delegations where we are. And then a little more than a thousand people are recruited by the ICRC in Switzerland and then expatriated in this delegation.

BONE: And your budget?

SOMMARUGA: The budget for this year is around one billion of Swiss francs. This is around seven hundred million US dollars ($700M).

POUR: Which comes from where?

SOMMARUGA: Governments, governments are financing the ICRC. And I must say that they are generous in the sense that they understand what is our work, the credibility of the institution is high.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Sommaruga, that's all the time we have. Thank you for joining us on this edition of World Chronicle. Our guest has been Cornelio Sommaruga, president of the International Committee of the Red Cross. He was interviewed by Afsane Bassir Pour of *Le Monde* and James Bone of *The Times* of London.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of World Chronicle.

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